Corporation for National and Community Service

2010 Social Innovation Fund

United Way of Greater Cincinnati

Reviewer Comments – Phase 2

SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND 2010
EVALUATION CONSENSUS FORM

PROGRAM DESIGN (45%)

Provide a panel assessment of the application's PROGRAM DESIGN as follows:

- **Write a brief Narrative Assessment;**
- **List the Significant Strengths and Weaknesses (annotate your comments by referencing the applicable Eligibility or Application Review Criteria); and**
- **Select a Rating for this section.**

Panel Narrative Assessment

The applicant proposes a geographically-based initiative that builds on the efforts of an innovative public/private partnership (the Strive Partnership) launched in 2006, which includes representatives from the education, business, nonprofit, civic and philanthropic sectors. The partnership has focused on improving a clear set of measurable outcomes on school readiness, college/career readiness, and other important youth-related issues (such as health indicators). The applicant is proposing to expand the depth and reach of current efforts (e.g., going to great lengths to increase the diversity of subgrantees within their portfolio). They evince a very strong commitment to the use of data in program design and improvement as well as replication and expansion. They also have a special interest in developing the evidence base for programs for which there is only preliminary evidence of effectiveness. The commitment to building and applying evidence is embedded in the subgrantee application process and the applicant's plan for technical assistance. Despite the obvious commitment to the use of data and evaluation, it's unclear how sophisticated the applicant is with regard to evaluation – are they able to go beyond correlation and establish causal relationships? This is a serious concern given the goals of the SIF.

Significant Strengths

+ The applicant provides a clear set of measurable outcomes on school readiness, college/career readiness, and other important youth-related outcomes (such as health indicators) that are all clearly connected to the statement of need regarding the geographic area. These indicators are already being tracked by the Strive Report Card or State of the Community Report, so there are baselines from which to measure progress. (*Program Design, A.i.*).

+ This proposal relies on an innovative public/private partnership that includes representatives from the education, business, nonprofit, civic and philanthropic sectors, which greatly enhances the resources upon which the applicant can draw. The partnership has a shared decision making and governance structure and convenes issue-focused networks which facilitate the sharing of expertise, best practices, data around specific goals. The partnership has drawn on a local

corporate model for the use of data in decision making and program improvement that each issue-focused network has used to develop action plans that must be approved by the partnership. This approach provides clear guidance in the use of data for program improvement and requires plans for evidence-based action steps. (*Program Design, B.i*).

+ The Strive Partnership prioritizes the use of data in decision making and program improvement. One benefit of this focus on data has been that participating organizations and programs have identified data that they need that are not readily available, which has led to plans to access and/or collect new data (e.g., longitudinal data that can track children through multiple early childhood systems). This indicates a strong commitment to securing the data necessary to improve program effectiveness. (*Program Design, B.i*).

+ The process for selecting subgrantees in strong, including significant attention to attracting a diverse group of applicants that goes beyond current subgrantees (e.g., widespread dissemination of the funding notice and mandatory training on the application process itself). The application process is carefully designed to identify subgrantees capable of: (1) expanding or replicating programs that show moderate or strong evidence of effectiveness, and/or (2) building the evidence base for programs with only preliminary evidence of effectiveness.(*Program Design, D.i.*).

+ The applicant has very clear criteria for their investments: impact, alignment and accountability. Alignment is important for focusing resources on a few key outcomes to increase impact. In terms of accountability, when subgrantees don't meet performance expectations, the applicant provides training and technical assistance. Programs that do not improve or that don't meet expectations for effectiveness do not receive funding renewals. (*Program Design, D.i.*).

+ The applicant's plan for technical assistance emphasizes supporting grantees in the use of data to build evidence of effectiveness, drive continuous improvement, and share and integrate lessons from evaluation among subgrantees implementing similar strategies. An upfront focus on training (including training on the application process) is designed to ensure that applicants and awardees have a thorough and shared understanding of the initiative's framework, vocabulary, and expectations, especially regarding the rigorous use of data. (*Program Design, D.ii.*).

Significant Weaknesses

● By creating networks of subgrantees working on similar outcomes, the applicant has created a strong platform for information exchange and shared learning. It is not clear, however, if this shared learning and individual subgrantee evaluations will be carried out in such a way to develop replicable interventions/programs or whether shared learning and evaluation is being used only to improve the performance of individual programs. (*Program Design, B.i.*).

● Although the applicant is strongly committed to the use of data in program design, improvement, replication and expansion, it is unclear how sophisticated this data use is. For example, the proposal cites examples of using data to establish correlations between program investments and outcomes, but as we know, correlation is not causation. The applicant has not demonstrated that they are proposing the use of shared metrics, methodologies and analytics necessary to effectively identify what works and under what conditions and for whom, etc., which is necessary for developing effective program models that can be replicated and expanded. (*Program Design, B.i.*).

Select a Rating for PROGRAM DESIGN (double-click in the applicable box and select "checked")

☐ **Excellent**   ☒ **Strong**   ☐ **Satisfactory**   ☐ **Weak/Non-responsive**

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY (35%)

Provide a panel assessment of the application's ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY as follows:

- **Write a brief Narrative Assessment;**
- **List the Significant Strengths and Weaknesses (annotate your comments by referencing the applicable Eligibility or Application Review Criteria); and**
- **Select a Rating for this section.**

Panel Narrative Assessment

Overall, the applicant has significant experience and capacity to carry out the proposed initiative, particularly with respect to using data to inform program design, continuous monitoring and improvement, and subgrantee accountability. What is not clear is whether the applicant's evaluation capacity is sufficient to support impact assessment, replication and expansion.

Significant Strengths

+   The applicant has a track record of using data and evaluation to determine which programs are worth further investment and scaling up. For example, the Books in Action program began as a small pilot in the Cincinnati public schools and based on demonstrated impact, the applicant made the necessary investments to scale the program from 5 to 35 classrooms. Further, the applicant made a shift 15 years ago to focus more directly on program effectiveness and accountability, moving from a focus on subgrantee outputs (e.g., number of people receiving a specific service) to a strong focus on outcomes and impact. (*Organizational Capacity, A.i. and A.ii.*)

Significant Weaknesses

•   The proposal provides suggestive evidence that the applicant's prior investments have resulted in important outcomes. For example, kindergarten readiness increased by 9% over the last four years. But it's not clear from the proposal how much of this change was attributable to the applicant's investments. This and other examples provided are correlations between investments and positive outcomes. It does not appear that the applicant has invested in evaluation methodologies that can support their implied conclusions about cause and effect relationships between their investments and the stated results, although they state their *intent* to do so for this initiative. Without the capacity to ascertain *what* about a particular program or effort -- in terms of program design, implementation, resources, external conditions, etc. -- led to particular outcomes, the applicant will be unable to demonstrate the actual impact of their investments. Nor will they be able to guide, direct, and hold subgrantees accountable for implementing effective practices and program models – all of which will impede the capacity for successful replication,

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which requires clarity of and adherence to best practices and condition setting. *(Organizational Capacity, A.i. and A.ii.)*

Select a Rating for ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY (double-click in the applicable box and select "checked")

☐ **Excellent**   ☐ **Strong**   ☒ **Satisfactory**   ☐ **Weak/Non-responsive**

COST EFFECTIVENESS AND BUDGET ADEQUACY (20%)

Provide a panel assessment of the application's COST-EFFECTIVENESS AND BUDGET ADEQUACY as follows:

- **Write a brief Narrative Assessment;**
- **List the Significant Strengths and Weaknesses (annotate your comments by referencing the applicable Eligibility or Application Review Criteria); and**
- **Select a Rating for this section.**

Panel Narrative Assessment

Overall, the budget seems adequate to cover the proposed work. The applicant's stated commitment to evaluation and supporting subgrantee's use of data is backed up with an appropriate allocation for these activities, as is the commitment to developing the evidence base for programs for which there is only preliminary evidence of effectiveness.

Significant Strengths

+ The applicant has allocated 10% of the grant's budget for evaluation and supporting grantees around data use, which is adequate to support what's promised and what's required of grantees. Further, programs with only preliminary or moderate evidence may be given additional resources to provide more intensive evaluation-focused TA. *(Cost-Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy, A.ii.)*

Significant Weaknesses

- Although the right amount is allocated for evaluation, it's not clear if this will ultimately be cost-effective given the concerns about evaluation spelled out above. *(Cost-Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy, A.i.)*

Select a Rating for COST-EFFECTIVENESS AND BUDGET ADEQUACY (double-click in the applicable box and select "checked")

☐ **Excellent**   ☒ **Strong**   ☐ **Satisfactory**   ☐ **Weak/Non-responsive**

OVERALL APPRAISAL

Overall, this application for a geographically-based initiative focused on improving a clear set of measurable outcomes on school readiness, college/career readiness, and other important youth-related issues (such as health indicators) is strong. Building on their longstanding experience in each of these issue areas (especially school readiness), and a four-year innovative public/private partnership, the applicant is poised to expand the depth, reach, and impact of it's current efforts by diversifying their portfolio of subgrantees; improving their use of data for program design, improvement, replication and expansion; and building the evidence base for programs for which there is only preliminary evidence of effectiveness. There are weaknesses, however, in the applicant's capacity to demonstrate the contribution of their investments to improvement in outcomes. It does not appear that the applicant has invested in evaluation methodologies that can support their implied conclusions about cause and effect relationships between their investments and results, although they state their *intent* to do so for this initiative. But given the applicant's obvious commitment to demonstrating impact, and the substantial progress they've made over time toward this ultimate goal, there is strong potential for success. For this reason, we place this application in the "Strong" Band.

☐ **Band I (Excellent):** A comprehensive and thorough application of excellent merit with very significant strengths and no/minimal significant weaknesses.

☒ **Band II (Strong):** An application that demonstrates overall competence and is worthy of support, where the value of the significant strengths outweigh the identified weaknesses.

☐ **Band III (Satisfactory):** An application with potential, where strengths and weaknesses are approximately equal. However, some fundamental weaknesses have been identified.

☐ **Band IV (Weak/Non-Responsive):** An application with very significant weaknesses and no/minimal significant strengths that have been identified. This option may also include an application that is non-responsive to the published criteria.